

9.13.2007 - Coal: Uniting West Virginians in the Quest for Innovative Energy Solutions

Coal, our nation's most abundant natural energy resource, plays an integral role in the everyday lives of West Virginians. A defining aspect of our state and a longstanding symbol of our shared heritage, coal will continue to be a key component of our economy, our culture, and our way of life in West Virginia for years to come.

As America looks toward the future, seeking greater energy independence - as well as cleaner, more efficient energy solutions - West Virginians have the opportunity to play a significant role in shaping new approaches that champion coal, while at the same time safeguarding our environment.

The United States currently relies heavily upon foreign oil to satisfy its energy needs, which increase by the day as our communities grow in both population and productivity. But rather than focusing on the abundance of responsible energy solutions right before our eyes, we have found ourselves beholden to the whims and desires of foreign governments.

We can and must do better for the American people. In order to forge a new direction in our nation's energy policy, we must utilize the resources that are right in front of us - most notably coal.

To begin achieving these goals, the House of Representatives last month approved H.R. 3221; the "New Direction for Energy Independence, National Security, and Consumer Protection Act." This legislation - sections of which were drafted and approved by the House Natural Resources Committee, which I chair - takes important steps to secure the future use of coal in America.

H.R. 3221 includes a key provision that will initiate a framework for enabling our nation to sequester carbon dioxide underground, helping to mitigate coal's impact on climate change. This is an issue that I personally worked to advance in the Congress because I know that the coal industry's continued economic success is linked to its environmental success.

West Virginians know well that, although we can talk about ethanol, wind, and solar power all we want, coal - which already produces half of the electricity in this country - will continue to play a pivotal role in America's national energy policy. At the same time, climate change concerns require us to aggressively address the challenges of the carbon dioxide that is emitted when coal is burned or liquefied.

Three provisions in H.R. 3221 seek to accomplish that goal.

The first would launch an extensive national program to identify geological formations - such as deep saline formations, unmineable coal seams, or oil and gas reservoirs - suitable for storing the carbon dioxide that results from coal combustion.

The second directs the Department of the Interior to devise a regulatory framework for conducting geological carbon sequestration activities on federal lands. This is important because no such authority currently exists to allow these activities to go forward.

The third provision promotes the development of a program that would help to promote the use of biomass - switchgrass and other plant materials - which can be used in combination with other fuels, such as coal. The Congress' vote in support of this provision is key to our continuing work to develop a successful domestic coal-to-liquids industry to reduce our dependence on foreign oil. Expert studies show that when coal is mixed with biomass in the coal-to-liquids production process, it produces a cleaner fuel at the tailpipe than conventional gasoline, dramatically reducing carbon emissions.

The promise of coal-to-liquids is already taking off. Numerous businesses and the U.S. Air Force are investing in research and development to help make the industry a reality. In August, the Coal-to-Liquids Coalition held its first conference in southern West Virginia's coal country, underscoring the pivotal role our state and our citizens will play in fostering this fuel.

By using coal in liquid form, West Virginians can help to move America

forward. When we lead by example and allow ourselves to see beyond the conventional, we can continue to better our nation, state, and communities.